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SENSITIVE
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SUBJECT: Quanzhou Officials Tell Their Side of the Wastewater
Treatment Plant Story

REF A: GUANGZHOU 545 AND PREVIOUS

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distribution. Please protect accordingly.

11. (SBU) Summary: Quanzhou Foreign Affairs Office officials met
CongenOff without warning at Xiamen Airport September 18 and offered
to arrange meetings with local officials to discuss the continuing
standoff at a suspect wastewater treatment plant. Local officials
disputed villager claims that the treatment plant was the source of
elevated cancer rates in the area. Officials claim not to have
attempted to regain control of the facility because they do not want
to aggravate the situation. Officials appeared to contradict
themselves when discussing whether untreated waste had been
discharged directly into the sea. The government is unwilling to
relocate the plant. Villagers, who are being closely monitored, are
becoming increasingly hesitant to share information by telephone.
End summary.

An Unexpected Escort

12. (SBU) The Deputy Director of the Quanzhou Foreign Affairs Office
(FAO) unexpectedly met CongenOff at the Xiamen airport September 18
and invited him on the spot into a car for an unanticipated
discussion about a suspect wastewater treatment plant currently held
by villagers in Fujian's Fengwei Township (reftel). (Note: The
Consulate had not advised FAO of CongenOff's planned travel to
Xiamen. End note.) The FAO official noted that his office had
learned of the Consulate's interest in the situation and offered to
set up meetings with local government officials to help provide a
more complete picture of the situation.

Official Contradiction -- and Confirmation

13. (SBU) Quanzhou local government and officials from the
Environmental Protection Bureau September 20 both contradicted and
confirmed information about the wastewater treatment plant
previously received from villagers. Quangang District local Party

Committee Member and Information Section Head Lin Yaoping said that although construction of the plant had been completed by the end of 2007, the facility was not put into operation until mid-August, 2009, due to delays in completing a network of feeder pipelines. Lin asserted that, since the plant had not handled sewage before mid-August, the facility could not have caused the alleged elevated rates of cancer in the village.

14. (SBU) Lin contended that authorities had actively tried to reach out to and communicate with the villagers. He said that 300 government workers organized into 22 teams had already held over 50 meetings in the village. Officials held an informational meeting September 20 for representatives from the fishing and aquaculture industries to hear concerns and to offer assurances that the area's products were safe to eat. Officials, Lin claimed, have not tried to regain control of the plant because they do not want to aggravate the situation.

15. (SBU) Lin acknowledged that environmental sampling results showed that untreated waste from the plant contained elevated levels of cadmium and other chemicals. He noted that the holding tank waste was untreated because the plant was still in a testing, pre-operational phase. Lin asserted that the plant's treated waste water -- once fully operational -- would pass environmental standards. He denied the villagers' assertion that the plant had discharged untreated waste directly into the sea but appeared to contradict himself on this point by unconvincingly asserting that temporary giant fire-hose-like tubes running from the holding tanks to the nearby sea were connected, underwater, with a deep sea disposal pipeline.

Government: The plant cannot be relocated

16. (SBU) Lin said the government cannot accept the villagers' demand

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that the plant be relocated. When asked about government plans to peacefully resolve this situation, Lin said the government would continue to try to educate the villagers to gain their understanding. He noted that villagers permitted officials to pump 30 tons of a biological agent into the holding tanks September 13 to stem the stench. Lin said that an investigative unit is investigating allegations of corruption by local officials in allowing businesses to send untreated industrial wastes to the facility, but said the allegations had not been substantiated.

17. (SBU) Regarding villager allegations that more than ten villagers have been detained by police, Lin said he was unaware of any detentions but had been informed that six villagers had been questioned by police concerning illegal acts. CongenOff asked the FAO for assistance in clarifying allegations that villagers had been detained, but by September 21 had not yet received a response.

Villagers Being Closely Monitored

18. (SBU) One villager told us separately that he had heard that a protest by villagers at the Quangang District Office had turned violent September 19, with villagers damaging the door to the office. Police monitoring of suspected villagers has increased, with villagers increasingly reluctant to share information by phone. One Fuzhou-based NGO told us that local People's Congress officials had urged it not to get involved in the Quangang wastewater treatment plant issue, with the congress officials saying villagers and their contacts were both being closely monitored.

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